VETERANS CONNECTIONS
News from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs ★ Volume 6, Issue 10 ★ October 2026

Message from IDVA Director Terry Prince

Veteran homelessness continues to impact veterans and their families across the nation. This month, I had the honor of participating on a panel hosted by the National Housing Conference and The Home Depot Foundation, "From Insight to Impact: Advancing Solutions in Veterans Housing" at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The conference brought together housing leaders, service providers, policymakers, funders and veterans' advocates to discuss solutions to expand housing for veterans.

Homelessness impacts veterans and families at their core. Too many veterans have spent the night in a car, on the street, and at best, in a shelter. The constant struggle of not knowing where you will be in an hour, five hours, or the next day elevates stress and leads to a desperate cycle of uncertainty and hopelessness.

According to the October 2026 preliminary analysis of VA data, the projected count of homeless veterans is approximately 29,822. This marks an 8.2% decrease from the prior year and the largest single-year decrease in veteran homelessness in 10 years. IDVA is proud to serve on the state's interagency Task Force that is directed by Christine Haley, the Chief Homelessness Officer for the State of Illinois who shepherds the Home Illinois Plan, a statewide initiative aimed at building affordable housing, expanding safety nets, and preventing homelessness. HUD recognizes Illinois as one of the states with the largest numerical decreases in veteran homelessness nationwide. We are proud of the results we're seeing but cannot rest until the number of veterans experiencing homelessness falls to zero.

If you are experiencing homelessness or know someone who is, there are resources with access to funding and housing.

How to Get Help Now

1. Call 877-424-3838 (National Call Center for Homeless Veterans) for immediate connection U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs+1.
2. Call IDVA at 1-217-782 6641 for Illinois specific assistance vetuplift.com.
3. Contact Illinois Joining Forces at 833-INFO-IJF (833-463-6453) illinoisjoiningforces.org

These programs can provide emergency shelter, rental assistance, case management, health care, and job support to help veterans stabilize and avoid homelessness.

Thank you for staying connected to IDVA.

Sincerely,

Terry Prince, Director and U.S. Navy Veteran

Illinois Lottery Ticket Supports Veterans Service Organizations

Support Illinois Veterans with the 7X Bingo Multiplier Instant Ticket!

The Illinois Lottery supports veterans across the state through its $5 7X Bingo Multiplier Instant Ticket. A portion of the proceeds goes to IDVA, which distributes the funds to organizations that provide essential programs and services for Illinois veterans.

Funds raised through ticket sales make a meaningful difference in veterans' lives by supporting housing assistance, job training, mental health services, and other critical resources. When you purchase a 7X Bingo Multiplier Instant Ticket, players have a chance to win up to $200,000 while also helping make a direct impact on the men and women who have served our country.

Learn more about how this ticket supports Veterans.

Thank you for standing with us as we continue our work to support Illinois veterans!

Veterans Cash Grants

The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs Allocates Over $500,000 in Illinois Lottery Veterans' Cash Grants to Veteran Service Organizations

DVA allocated nearly **$500,000 for the second quarter of FY2027** in grants supporting organizations providing vital services to veterans and their families across Illinois.

The grants are part of the Veterans' Cash Grants program, which aims to address critical issues facing veterans, including homelessness, post-traumatic stress treatment, behavioral health treatment, and workforce development. The grants are funded through proceeds from the Illinois Lottery's $5 7x Bingo Multiplier ticket. The Veterans Scratch-Off Lottery Ticket grant is a yearly competitive reimbursement grant offered quarterly to nonprofits, tax-exempt entities, and governmental organizations that assist veterans in need. Eligible organizations may apply for grants ranging from $25,000 to $100,000 annually. Each quarter, IDVA's committee reviews applications and awards grants to groups that have demonstrated proven need.

"The recipients of this quarter's veterans cash grants offer services that directly impact the well-being of veterans and their families," **said IDVA Director Terry Prince**. "The continued partnership with the Illinois Lottery presents opportunities for veteran service organizations to expand their programs and extend their reach."

Voluntary Action Center of Northern Illinois: Malnutrition among older and disabled veterans in America is a pressing and worsening crisis. Meals on Wheels is a proven intervention, delivering meals directly to homes and combating food insecurity and malnutrition among homebound older adults and individuals with disabilities. This grant will serve 75 Illinois veterans residing in Bureau, DeKalb, LaSalle, and Putnam counties, providing an estimated 7,500 home-delivered meals during the grant period. By ensuring regular access to healthy meals, Meals on Wheels directly strengthens veterans' physical and mental well-being while supporting long-term independent community living.

Grant: $50,000

Veterans Cash Grants

This Able Veteran: This grant allows Able Veteran to train six service dogs to recognize and respond to trauma symptoms before they escalate, providing vital support to veterans through anxiety alerts and nightmare interruption techniques.

Grant: $99,550

Central Illinois Veterans Commission: The Illinois Central Illinois Veterans Commission provides veterans with the tools and system to obtain permanent housing This grant provides funding for furnishings and equipment for two homes for veterans. The veterans will be selected from the veteran homeless community or other veterans with severely insecure housing but live in the Central Illinois region.

Grant: $100,000

Fishing for Freedom: Fishing for Freedom - Quincy is a no entry fee bass, catfish, and crappie tournament that pairs active-duty military and veterans with professional anglers, avid tournament fishermen, fishing guides, and local outdoorsmen for a day of fishing on local fisheries. Veterans enjoy a weekend of entertainment and enjoyment of the great outdoors at no cost. This event includes a social hour, tournament for Veterans' Home residents, a Heroes Banquet, and tournament fishing on the Mighty Mississippi River or Mark Twain Lake.

Grant: $50,000

Leave No Veteran Behind: Leave No Veteran Behind (LNVB) operates the Veteran Business and Wellness Corridor, a comprehensive resource center, located on the southeast side of Chicago, that improves the economic stability, health, and overall well-being of veterans, service members, and their families. The Corridor provides workforce development, career coaching, small business support, benefits navigation, financial education, peer support groups, wellness programming, and connections to mental health services in one accessible location. Through partnerships with veteran-serving organizations, employers, and wellness providers, participants will receive coordinated services, direct employment opportunities, and individualized support that promote long-term self-sufficiency and economic mobility.

Grant: $100,000

Friends of Fisher House: Friends of Fisher House operates a humanitarian program which supports families during medical crises, including operation and maintenance of Hines VA Fisher House and Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center Fisher House. These Fisher Houses provide a home for families of military and veteran patients receiving medical care at these hospitals.

Grant: $65,000

Veterans' Home at Quincy Celebrates its 140th Founder's Day

On February 18, 1885, Commander D.L. Dickason said, "I believe the day has come for a soldier and sailors' home to be established and maintained by the state of Illinois." On June 26, 1885, the Illinois General Assembly passed a bill establishing a home for the veterans of the Mexican War and the Civil War. $200,000 was appropriated for the new home, and after several months of review, Quincy was selected among 52 cities that sought the honor. The Home was officially opened on October 20th, 1886, 140 years ago.

During the opening ceremony, Private Joseph Wilson Fifer was the final speaker representing veterans. Following his service in the Civil War, Fifer advocated for veterans' pensions. He later became the mascot of the Home and the 19th governor of Illinois.

The Home has provided care for thousands of veterans and their spouses. It has transformed over the years, with additions, renovations, and recently the building of a stunning, state-of-the-art domiciliary and long-term care buildings. The 210-acre campus is steeped in history while evolving to meet the needs of veterans with modern buildings that marry function with aesthetics. At the 140

The Veterans' Home at Quincy is Illinois' oldest and largest Veterans' Home. It cares for nearly 300 residents, including veterans and their spouses. In addition to its residences, it's 210-acre beautiful campus is home to bison, deer, and geese. Lake Illinois provides fishing and relaxation. Residents attend services at the Chapel, and Lippincott Hall is the backdrop for many events and celebrations, including the 140th Founder's Day, October 20, 2026.

The celebration included opening comments by Marketing Director Valerie Peterson and remarks by IDVA Director Terry Prince who said, "We've cared for hundreds of veterans, and it's the commitment and the legacy of the Quincy Veterans' Home continues to live on. It's here where we are taking care of America's finest every day, never forgetting what they've done for our country."

Activities Directors Sara Colgrove led a trivia game which revealed many unknown facts about the history of the home. The residents enjoyed lunch prepared on the new grill donated by the American Legion, and a "champagne" toast was enjoyed. It was a celebration of the rich history of the Home and its promising future.

In the words of veteran and resident Robert Whitten, "I live in the Taj Mahal. It has been wonderful, and I'm glad to be here. I've enjoyed helping people, and this is my family."

Private Joe Fifer greets the residents.

IDVA Director Terry Prince addresses the residents and staff.

Cheers to 140 years of the Veterans' Home at Quincy.

Veterans' Homes

Casino Afternoon at the Veterans' Home at Manteno

Left to right: Jillian McLain, R1 Nursing Supervisor; Dustin Blaylock, R1 Care Plan Coordinator; and Angela Gifford, R1 Restorative Nurse.

Veterans' Home at Quincy

Domiciliary residents U.S. Army Veteran Kirby Wiemelt, U.S. Air Force Veteran Annie Rohe, U.S. Army Veteran Jim Chaney and veteran spouse Marilyn Stambaugh handed out green army men suckers and traditional Halloween candy.

The Veterans' Home at Quincy Employee Recognition Committee hosted a Trunk or Treat event around Lake Illinois for staff members and their families for trick or treating, s'mores over the stone fireplace, and a meal. A group of residents got in the spirit too, handing out treats from the Home's Deuce and a Half UTV, complete with a uniformed "driver". Several residents came to enjoy the festivities where nearly 300 people joined in the Halloween fun.

Women Veterans

Niki Marin Founder and President of Beneath the Service and IDVA Central Region Supervisor Kimberly Yantis

Central Region Supervisor Kimberly Yantis attended the Beneath The Service Women Veterans Leadership Training which brought together women veterans from across the country to focus on leadership development, personal resilience, and building strong peer networks within the veteran community. The training offered a thoughtful blend of workshops, discussions, and hands on activities centered around identity, confidence, communication, and leading with authenticity.

More than 800 women veterans applied, and only 40 were accepted into the cohort. It is a five month accredited program through Virginia Tech. The program was impactful and empowering where she heard other women veterans share their stories and leadership journeys which underscored the unique strength and perspective women bring to service and to their work in veterans' advocacy. The environment was supportive and energizing, and it reinforced the importance of continued investment in women focused veteran programs.

"I believe this training would greatly benefit other female veterans in the state, especially those seeking to grow as leaders, strengthen their voices, or expand their professional networks," said Kimberly.

For more information, visit: Programs | Beneath the Service

National Women Veterans United

IDVA Veteran Service Officers Cynthia McKee and Michele Richards, and Women Veterans Coordinator Margo Watson attended an inspiring women veterans' event in Evergreen Park, hosted by Rochelle Crump, President of the National Women Veterans United.

The event brought together women Veterans for a day of fellowship, information sharing, advocacy, and connection. Attendees had the opportunity to share their experiences, learn about issues affecting women Veterans, and strengthen relationships within the women Veteran community.

The mission of the National Women Veterans United is reflected in its powerful motto: "One Voice; One Vision." The event embodied this message by bringing women Veterans together to share their voices, raise awareness of issues affecting their community, and work toward a shared vision for the future of women Veterans.

One of the keynote speakers, Dr. Dickerson, provided an update on the planning for the Million Women Veteran March, scheduled for November 2027. She shared that planning is already underway and emphasized that the march will provide an opportunity to acknowledge and bring greater attention to the needs, concerns, and experiences of women who have served and those who currently wear the uniform.

Healthcare was highlighted as one of the important policy issues that will be addressed, including concerns surrounding access. The discussion underscored the importance of ensuring that women Veterans have a voice in conversations and policies that directly affect their health, well-being, and quality of life.

Dr. Dickerson concluded her remarks with an inspiring call to action: "Let's aim for a million!"

IDVA remains committed to connecting women Veterans with resources, strengthening partnerships, and supporting opportunities that elevate the voices and experiences of women who have served our nation.

Women Veterans Rock

Women Veterans Program Coordinator Margo Watson and U.S. Army Veteran LaToya Hayward.

Women Veterans Program Coordinator Margo Watson visited the Obama Presidential Center through an opportunity made possible by Women Veterans Rock. The day included meaningful conversations, fellowship, mentorship, and opportunities to connect with other women Veterans. One of Margo's highlights was meeting fellow woman veteran LaToya Hayward as she celebrated her recent selection to Colonel where they connected on experiences as women in the military and veterans.

Being surrounded by women who understand the unique experiences, challenges, accomplishments, and resilience that come with military service was both empowering and inspiring for Margo. Experiences like this strengthen our collective community and remind us of the importance of lifting one another as we continue to serve, lead, and make an impact.

Women Veterans

25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026

Aretha Spurlock, *Army*

Commander Aretha Spurlock is a retired U.S. Army veteran, senior federal acquisition professional, and distinguished veterans' advocate whose career reflects sustained excellence in service and leadership. She honorably served 20 years in the United States Army in technically demanding medical and laboratory roles, supporting mission-critical healthcare and research operations at installations in the United States, Germany, and Korea. Known for her professionalism, discipline, and resilience, Commander Spurlock consistently upheld the highest standards of accountability and operational effectiveness, retiring in 2005.

Following military service, Commander Spurlock continued her commitment to public service through civilian leadership roles in healthcare systems and federal contracting. She supported VA hospitals, Native American reservations, correctional facilities, and government agencies before advancing into federal acquisition, where she currently serves as a Lead Contract Specialist with the Department of Veterans Affairs. A graduate of the University of Maryland with an MBA and a Master's in Contract Management, she has also demonstrated exemplary veterans' leadership through the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

Since joining in 2012, she has served five years as Quartermaster and, in 2023, made history as the first female Commander of VFW Post 311. As Commander, she has supported the Mississippi flood victims, supplied food and clothing to local communities, awarded 8 scholarships to high school seniors, sponsored Christmas toy giveaways to local children and children residing at the VFW's National Home for Homeless children. Commander Spurlock's career embodies integrity, service under pressure, and an enduring commitment to veterans, government excellence, and community advancement.

25 Illinois Women Veteran Leaders in 2026

Dr. Karen Stendson-McMillan, *Army*

Dr. Karen Stendson-McMillan, is an Evangelist at Valley Kingdom Ministries International located in Oak Forest, Illinois. Dr. McMillan has always been passionate about the welfare of others and does whatever she can to maintain the health and welfare of others mind, body, and spirit.

Dr. McMillan enrolled in Augustana College where she received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology and a master's degree in communications. She received both degrees by the age of 23. Dr. McMillan received her Doctorate Degree in Theology at the age of 59 on April 22, 3023.

Following graduation Dr. McMillan joined the Army where she was enlisted for the next 26 years. During her Army career, she advanced to the rank of Sergeant First Class and has taught and trained more than 300 Soldiers under her leadership.

Dr. McMillan has served as Platoon Sergeant in Italy, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland and the war in Kuwait, Bagdad, Fallujah, and Iraq. Dr. McMillan was a Combat Life Saver, where she triaged Soldiers as a first responder. She is now a CPR instructor with the American Heart Association where she trains Health Care Providers and Daycare workers.

Dr. McMillan retired from the Army at the age of 49. Since retirement she met a phenomenal group of women called the National Women Veterans United also known as NWVU where she sits on the Board of Directors.

Call for Nominations for the Illinois Women Veterans Leaders of 2027

We are seeking women Veterans in Illinois who demonstrate leadership, mentoring, and advocacy in their Veteran communities. Nominate yourself or another women Veteran to be recognized.

Nominations are open from **October 15, 2026 at 8:00 AM** and will close on **February 10, 2027 at 12:00 PM**.

Nomination Criteria

- Must be an Illinois Resident
- Military Service and Accomplishments
- Leadership and Mentorship in the Veterans' Community
- For full details on the Nominee Criteria, please review the survey
- Individuals honored in 2025 will not be eligible for consideration in the 2026 selection cycle

Website Link for Submission or scan QR Code

- https://tinyurl.com/5n8j668r

For any further questions

- Email: Angela.stpaul@va.gov
- Womenveterans@illinois.gov

IDVA ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS WOMEN VETERANS PROGRAM

Field Services

Veteran Service Officer Michael Willis, Veteran Service Officer Charletta Lutcher, Education Specialist Enrique Cabrera, and Veteran Service Officer Malon Norfleet coordinated a Veterans Resource Fair on October 13th at the American Legion in Joliet to assist in advocating for veterans and helping them receive the benefits that they are entitled to.

Pink Out Day

Across the state, IDVA employees showed their support of people battling breast cancer, the survivors, and those whose lives were lost by wearing their best pink. Thank you to everyone who supported this initiative. For those interested in more information on mammograms, the most effective means to early detection, please visit: Mammogram/Breast Health - Women Veterans Health Care.

IDVA is Hiring

IDVA continues to recruit, hire, and train for positions across the agency. IDVA's Veterans' Homes in Anna, Chicago, LaSalle, Manteno, and Quincy are continuously hiring medical professionals and staff to care for veterans. Veteran Service Officers are in high demand, and positions are available across the state. For veterans interested in serving their fellow veterans, this is an amazing opportunity to train to guide veterans through the claims process. You can change lives. Central Office positions are available to help support the teams on the front lines. Consider attending one of the virtual job fairs that can guide you through the process of applying for a state job and relevant information on resumes and interviewing.

Learn the Ropes of Working for the State of Illinois

Working for Illinois means being part of a diverse community dedicated to making a difference in people's lives every day. Join us in shaping the future of our great state, where innovation, collaboration, and opportunity thrive.

Illinois offers opportunities in nearly every field and experience. Join the Illinois Career Workshops to learn how to seek and apply for positions leading to life-changing experiences and meaningful careers

Illinois offers excellent benefits for employees and their families.

- Career counseling
- Instructions on building a state profile and reading a job bulletin
- Interview Tips

The first Thursday of each month:

August 6th
September 3rd
October 1st
November 5th
December 3rd

10:30 AM – 12:00 PM
Veterans are welcome at 10:00 AM

Illinois Department of Employment Security
107 N. 3rd Street, Quincy, Illinois

IDVA ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS · CMS CENTRAL MANAGEMENT SERVICES ILLINOIS · WORK FOR ILLINOIS · IDES ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF EMPLOYMENT SECURITY · Quincy Workforce Center An Illinois workNet Center

SERVE THOSE WHO SERVED

Join IDVA for a series of virtual job fairs to learn more about becoming part of Team IDVA

11/2/26	10:00-10:45AM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees	
11/5/26	3:00-3:45 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin	
11/6/26	2:30-3:15 PM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points	
11/9/26	5:30-6:15 PM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward	
11/10/26	1:00-1:45 PM	How to read a Job Bulletin	
11/12/26	9:30-10:15 AM	Interview Tips and Tricks	
11/17/26	5:30-6:15 PM	Interview Tips and Tricks	
11/19/26	2:00-2:45 PM	IDVA Extraordinary Employees	
11/24/26	10:00-10:45 AM	How to Certify Your Veterans Points	
11/30/26	10:00-10:45 AM	Creating a Profile, Putting Your Best Foot Forward	

IDVA ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

Do you have a Compliment, Recommendation, Question, or Complaint?

Illinois Veterans Accountability Unit (VAU)

Let us Know!

If you are an Illinois veteran or other Illinois resident who seeks services from the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs (IDVA); a resident of any Illinois Veterans' Home, a family member of a resident, a visitor of any Illinois Veterans' Home; a vendor and/or contractor of the IDVA; or staff of the IDVA, we want to hear from you.

This office welcomes feedback about the services being provided to the veterans of Illinois. If you received exceptional service or have concerns involving any member of the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs, please let us know.

Email us at

IDVA.accountability@illinois.gov

or Call our Toll-Free Helpline

1-855-660-7011

More information about the VAU can be found on the Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs website

https://veterans.illinois.gov/

The VAU maintains the confidentiality of investigations, complainants, and witnesses to the maximum extent allowable, but must disclose complaints to the Office of the Executive Inspector General (OEIG). You can obtain more information about the OEIG or file a complaint with the OEIG directly through its website at https://oeig.illinois.gov/.

Our mission at the IDVA is very simple. To serve those who have served. In doing so, we serve not only the men and women who have worn the uniform, but also their families. It is our privilege to be able to help our veterans receive the benefits they have earned through service to our nation. Our goal is to empower our veterans and their families to thrive in all aspects of their lives.

We know there are many veterans within our great state who do not require any assistance – but we still want to encourage you to "Stand Up and Be Counted!" by registering with your local VSO. In doing so, you're helping IDVA to do a better job of planning for services, seeking federal funding and understanding the needs of our veteran communities statewide. Click here to register.

We thank you for your service and for your sacrifice and we at the IDVA look forward to offering our services to you.

IDVA ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF VETERANS AFFAIRS

★ **Follow us**

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